

# The Mercury News

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## *Making certain the fix isn't in*

Like many March Madness fans, Rachel Newman-Baker is keenly interested in point spreads. Throughout the NCAA tournament, she will study the lines listed in newspapers and posted online -- but not because she plans to place a bet.

As the NCAA's director of agents, gambling and amateurism activities, Newman-Baker works closely with Las Vegas oddsmakers to monitor betting lines for suspicious activity. Professional gamblers are not always her chief concern. She is also interested in amateur bookies -- especially those on college campuses who prey on players in need of cash.

Her fears seem justified:

- A 1999 survey conducted by the University of Michigan found that 5 percent of male football and basketball players had bet on their own games, shaved points or provided insider information.
- A 2003 NCAA study found that 20 percent of male athletes had bet on college sports in the previous year -- and that 2 percent of football and men's basketball players said they had been asked to affect the outcome of a game.

But some college and federal officials believe the problem is much worse than either study indicated, and they blame technology. Athletes can use university computers to access the estimated 2,000 gambling Web sites. Cell phones and PDAs make it easy to place bets or pass inside information.

In response, some schools block gambling Web sites. Others perform periodic checks of computer bookmarks. A few install software that alerts officials if gambling sites are accessed.

"It's always going to be a challenge," said Newman-Baker, who played basketball at Berea College, an NAIA school in Kentucky, in the late 1990s. "But now there are so many ways you can place a quick bet."

The thrust of the NCAA's anti-gambling program is education. It sends each school an anti-gambling video before conference tournaments and requires March Madness participants to sign affidavits stating whether he/she

has ever gambled on sports. (If the answer is yes, the NCAA is notified.) Before the Sweet 16 games, NCAA and FBI officials will meet with each team to discuss the ills of gambling. In addition, the NCAA basketball committee, which operates the tournament, keeps the officials' assignments (and travel plans) confidential so gamblers cannot contact them.

All that, and it's still not enough.

"I don't think there's anything the NCAA can do besides what they're doing," said former Arizona State coach Bill Frieder, whose program was hit by a point-shaving scandal in the 1993-94 season.

"But all the refs have to do is make one call. All the coach has to do is make one substitution. All the player has to do is miss one free throw, and it can affect the point spread. It's a very simple thing to do."

University of Pennsylvania economist Justin Wolfers believes point shaving takes place in 5 percent of all games with large spreads.

Wolfers studied the results of 44,120 games from 1989 to 2005 and determined that heavy favorites -- teams favored by more than 12 points -- missed covering the spread an inordinate number of times. This makes perfect sense from a point-shaving standpoint, because players on heavily favored teams can often shave points without risking a loss.

According to the New York Times, Wolfers found that although favorites covered the spread 50.01 percent of the time, heavy favorites covered in only 48.4 percent of their games -- a "significant deviation" in his view.

And while it's true that teams with big leads often relax in the final minutes, Wolfers determined that heavy favorites handily beat the spread as often as small favorites. What he finds interesting is that heavy favorites just miss covering the spread more often than they narrowly beat the spread. (The frequency should be about the same.)

Despite overwhelming evidence that campus bookies were the source of its problem, the NCAA spent years

waging legislative war against the Las Vegas sports books. Former NCAA president Cedric Dempsey reasoned that if the sports books stopped setting lines on college events, then newspapers would stop publishing them, and if newspapers stopped publishing them, on-campus gambling would disappear.

Dempsey worked with Capitol Hill lawmakers to produce the 2001 Amateur Sports Integrity Act, which banned gambling on college sports. Co-sponsored by John McCain and John Edwards, it never got out of the Senate.

"I told Dempsey, 'The problem is not with legal betting. You're talking about a problem on campuses,'" said Frank Fahrenkopf, chief executive of the American Gaming Association. "There was no connection between the problem and his solution."

Since Dempsey's departure in 2002, the NCAA has changed its position. It now considers sports books an ally -- the entity best equipped to detect suspicious wagering.

"It sounds strange because we have different jobs," Newman-Baker said, "but one issue we can agree on is the integrity of the games. . . . We've reached out to Las Vegas. There's a relationship in place. They're comfortable sharing information."

It was the sports books, after all, that alerted the FBI and NCAA to suspicious activity before several Arizona State games in the 1993-94 season. A federal investigation determined two players, Stevin "Hedake" Smith and Isaac Burton, had shaved points four times to repay gambling debts. (In one game, Smith scored 39 points to offset the points he was allowing.)

"Say Hedake would have done that the first game to pay off a debt, and the second game for some pocket change, then never done it again," Frieder said in his first extensive comments on the situation. "It would never have been detected. Is it going on with other players and officials and not detected? It's scary that it happened and almost got through." □